

Farewell to the Falcons of Slievenaglogh

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Peregrine falcons have finally abandoned Slievenaglogh in the Cooley mountains. Nobody can be sure why they left, or if they were driven away by fire, poisoned or shot, but the chances are that they did not abandon such a perfect nesting site of their own accord.



Peregrine Falcon eating a Redshank

Biologists are supposed to eschew anthropomorphism but an exception must be made for the Peregrine Falcon. Of all the birds of prey the Peregrine is undoubtedly most impressive, for their hunting prowess, speed and agility, and for their eponymous wandering, for the word "peregrine" means wanderer. A peregrine may wander over 25,000 miles in the course of a year visiting just about every habitat on earth with only the Sahara desert and Antarctica being excluded.

Peregrines are not huge, a Golden Eagle or Buzzard is bigger, but the Peregrine is more powerful, and to its prey, more dreadful. To hunt, Peregrines use many techniques, but the most spectacular is the high stoop. In this manoeuvre the bird observes its prey, perhaps a flock of Golden Plover at Dundalk docks, from a few kilometres away, soaring high or sitting on a cliff crag somewhere in the Cooley Mountains. Its visual acuity is such that it can pick out individual birds in a flock at more than one kilometre distance. When it is ready the bird flies high, closes its wings and tail, and drops deadweight to ground achieving speeds of 360 kilometers per hour or 100 metres per second, using its head to direct it. Just before it hits the ground it pulls up and levels out, crashing into the flock of terrified flock of prey like a cruise missile, just a few feet above ground level. Generally the Peregrine strikes its prey at speed with bunched up talons. Watching from the Quay wall, all you see is a small puff of feathers and the bird falling to the ground. Now the Peregrine turns quickly and picks up the stunned bird, sometimes even before it hits the ground, and carries it off to a post to eat it. Such is their speed that during the Second World War, Spitfire test pilots reported seeing birds or prey overtaking them on a stoop - these turned out to be Peregrines, who probably felt that the aircraft were posing some sort of territorial challenge!

When Peregrines are in breeding mode the male may offer the prey to the female as a present. Like other Predatory animals, male Peregrines need to spend time with their mate to attenuate the females more violent instincts and build trust. Otherwise when the male bird, who is smaller than the female, attempts to couple, he might risk getting killed! Other trust-building activities include talon clutching, in which the birds fly high together and lock talons. This means that for a moment both are helpless and cannot fly, so start to tumble, finally separating before hitting the ground. You could see this over the valley of Glenmore last spring and the spring before, and probably for many hundreds of years before that. Sometime in March or April they mate and soon after produce three eggs, laid on a ledge of the cliff, such as at Slievenaglogh. During the summer both birds would work hard, hunting the fields and coast of Cooley to feed their young, who finally fledge, if they were allowed, in late summer.

Within days the fledgling birds are practicing death-defying stoops, chases and mock attacks with parents and siblings around the nest site, before dispersing in winter to hunt the huge influx of over-wintering birds from the north, or perhaps to wander down to South Africa or beyond, before returning again to their traditional nesting site.

But as I say, this year they did not return. It is hard to say why but human disturbance is all too likely, and interference from pigeon fanciers is a distinct possibility. Now the position of the pigeon fancier is understandable up to a point. A good homing pigeon is worth a lot of money, and much loved by its owner. If they are released, say,

at Giles Quay to race to Newry or Belfast the homers will fly up Glenmore Valley and if the Peregrines are breeding, there is no doubt that they will take a few pigeons, for homing pigeons are bred for speed and have lost all the caution of their wild ancestors. A simple solution would be to avoid racing them through the Cooleys or the Mournes during the summer months. Because in winter the Peregrines will be hunting the mudflats at Dundalk bay where there are much easier and richer pickings.

If you want to see a Peregrine around Dundalk, winter is the best time. Usually you will see them at Marsh South from north of Blackrock, or at Lurgangreen or Seabank, often sitting quietly on a post, watching their prey. Sometimes you can tell a Peregrine is in the area just from the plaintive calling and nervous shuffling around that the waders do when one is present. They are easily identified by their powerful build and vertical lines under their eyes, reputedly to improve their eyesight, like American Football Quarterbacks.

Peregrines were nearly wiped out in Ireland and globally by DDT but have come back. Lets hope that the day they come back to the Cooley's, they will receive the welcome and protection they deserve.